An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. The color palette is muted, featuring shades of grey, olive green, ochre, and earthy brown. The brushwork is visible, with some areas showing more pronounced strokes and others appearing smoother. The overall effect is one of depth and complexity.

C L A I R E S E I D L

CLAIRE SEIDL

ESSAY BY STEPHEN MAINE

DORSET ROAD BOOKS
NEW YORK 2010

CLAIRE SEIDL

The emotional immediacy that Claire Seidl's abstract paintings convey has long set them apart from those of her contemporaries. As the autographic mark is the badge of authenticity of gestural abstraction, the genre is linked historically to Abstract Expressionism's noisy celebration of intuition and impulse. But this sort of self-expressive showmanship is not what Seidl is about; her distinct blend of materiality and atmospherics, and her focus on the strictly visual, steadily building for years, has in her recent work taken on a subtle but unmistakable sensuality.

Some observers who are familiar with Seidl's process have commented on the unpredictability of her approach to the blank canvas; she adheres to no set of procedural givens or signature style. So it is hardly surprising that this alert and voracious painter would have no wish to be "remarkably consistent" or whatever bland accolade might otherwise describe a mid-career artist on autopilot. Seidl seeks new ways to mesh surface and space convincingly. She is well aware of her skills and her strengths, but always looks for a new pictorial resolution.

And that is what is most satisfying about these paintings: each is beautifully and intelligently resolved according to its own contingencies, and unto itself an active field of compositional and procedural forces. After decades in close

physical communication with her materials, Seidl knows when to impose her will upon them, and when to permit them to tell her what to do and where to go. No stylist, Seidl responds to each painting's latencies. If she ever had a bag of tricks, she checked it a long time ago and threw away the key.

What, then, is distinctly Seidlian about Seidl's new work? For one thing, she is a master of scale. **Landsakes** (Plate 1), at 25 by 29 inches, has an oceanic pull and a swampy redolence that outweigh its relative concision. Notwithstanding its sooty, mossy palette, the painting feels aquatic, as if we are gazing into a gamey pool that teems with flitting life forms. The interplay of layers is exquisite, syncopated and seductive, and suggests that the pastoral is not reassuringly timeless, but fleeting.

In 1955, three decades after his death, Claude Monet made a huge impression on New York with the Museum of Modern Art's acquisition of an eighteen-foot-long *Water Lilies*. Painters flocked to see this canvas; it is a key reference in Louis Finkelstein's seminal essay, "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism," published in the March 1956 issue of *Art News*. The painting was soon lost in the devastating fire of 1958, but it haunted the imagination of a generation of painters, including Ellsworth Kelly, Milton Resnick, and Philip Guston, among others. MoMA's triumphant 1960 exhibition of the monumental *Water Lilies* triptych, a work that had been considered a failure by Parisian audiences, helped mark the transition of

the art world's capital from Paris to New York. No less dramatic was the response of the general public and the art community to MoMA's 2009 – 2010 exhibition of Monet's *Water Lilies* in an installation that featured the full group of these late paintings. Does that help to explain New York painters' obsession with painting that makes you want to dive in, to shove the pretty weeds back and splash around?

Pray Tell (Plate 3) pushes the materiality of Seidl's work in a strange direction. Broadly brushed, blue-black veils sparkle with the ochre and greenish fissures of previous paint layers. Simultaneously concrete and atmospheric, it does a slow dissolve – Antoni Tàpies meets Odilon Redon. Any painter will appreciate the go-for-broke attitude behind this kind of rapid, complete, and irreversible overhaul of a painting's appearance, these enormous changes at the last minute.

Seidl is adept at keeping color, surface and the graphic or drawing element in her paintings in equipoise. None dominates the other; none takes over. So it has been for years: in **Rose Colored** (2005) (Plate 24), a trail of terre verte, among the most transparent oil colors, meanders around a bed of encrusted, dusty pink. The deceptively simple canvas blooms with visual counterpoints: form and void, warm and cool, line and mass, surface and space. The painting's chromatic restraint is exquisite, but no less so than its dynamics of surface and its graphical economy: these puffy loops might be clouds, pillows, roses?

More recently, such material atmospherics have become more piquant, as in **Bygones Will Be Bygones** (Plate 7). Figure and ground are utterly interchangeable, and there is no telling which of them initiated this encounter between glazy smears of deep forest green and retouched daubs of cool, opaque gray. The painting's jittery infill recalls Joan Mitchell; its overlapping systems of information, Terry Winters; its paradoxically unrefined touch, Mike Goldberg.

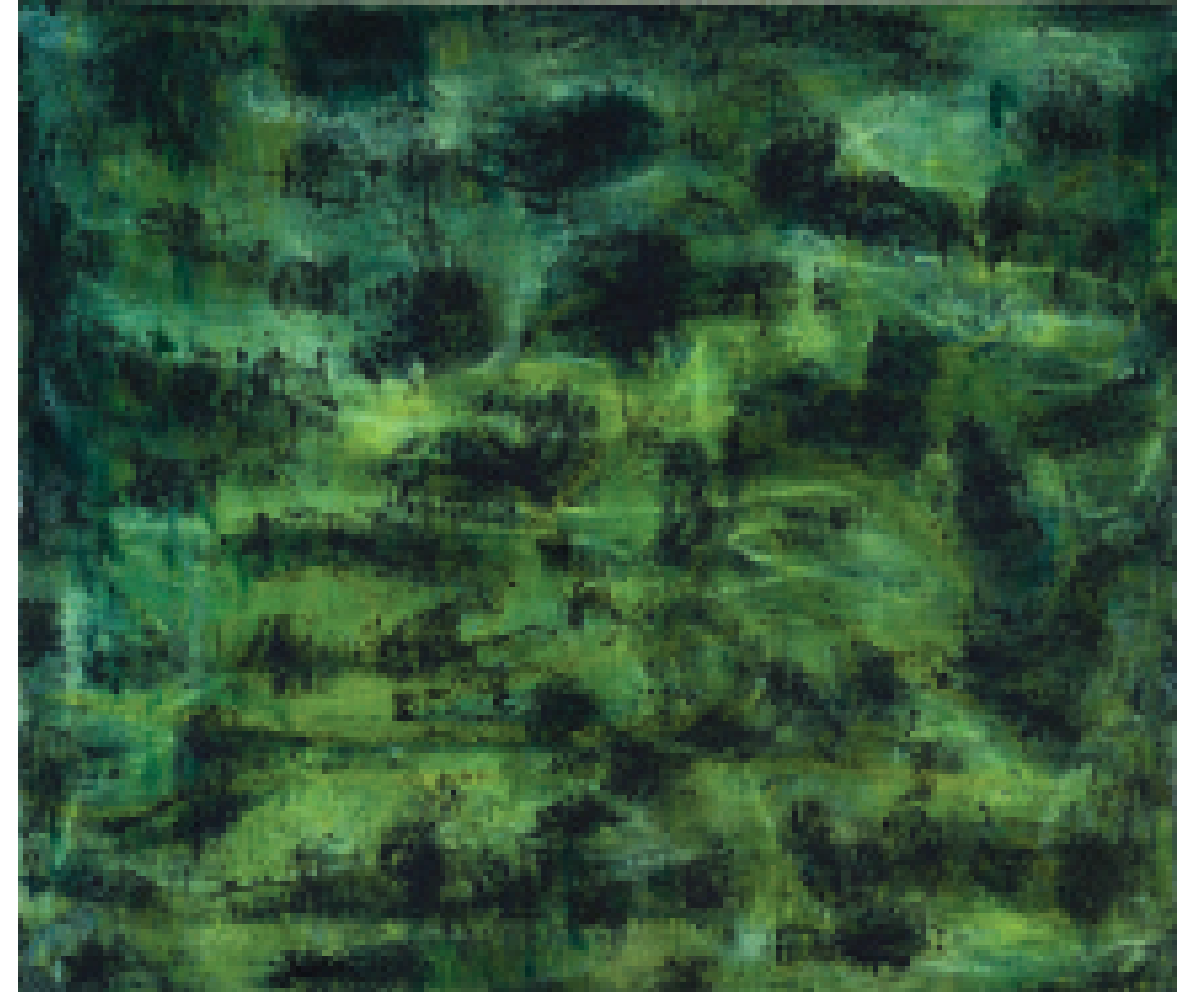
This old formalist chestnut, figure vs. ground, comes alive in Seidl's hands. **For the Life of Me** (2006) (Plate 5) pits blackish brushmarks, which are just becoming shapes with some individual character, against a swarming, brushy field of variegated greens that enact pressures on those shapes. The field pushes the figures around, not the reverse.

The grid, that modernist compositional staple, goes all swoony in **Kingdom Come** (Plate 23). Choppy and imprecise, horizontal and vertical strokes in a nearly neutral gray make their bleary way across an expanse of earthy, loamy ochre and green, kicking up and soaking in those colors in classic, luscious wet-into-wet technique. So this grid, far from being a screen between us and the atmospheric background, introduces us to it, entices us. The visual barrier heightens our curiosity, and satisfies it at the same time.

Seidl's fifteen-year involvement with photography, having provided her with a platform to engage directly with the forms and spaces of landscape,

has pushed her painting away from allusions to the landscape and into purer abstraction. One wonders if **Far Be It From Me** (Plate 11) amounts to a sweet send-off to Seidl's attempts to reconcile painting and photography. As if illuminated by a gyrating flashlight in the hands of an inquisitive child, the space of the canvas veers from cavernously deep to glaringly shallow.

Fair is Fair (Plate 25) is seductive in the utter straightforwardness of its charms. The modulated pink ground, doubtless the repository of considerable underpainting, is no less visually present than the feathery top layer. This last application, a poker-faced charcoal gray, skitters over the surface, enunciating both itself and the underpainting's tactility. Like figures in a carpet or in drifting clouds, the possibility of an image emerges. The delicate wipings reveal the latent imagistic possibilities of the ground. Seidl's singular achievement is to make the autographic mark, the gesture, allude not to a unique sensibility announcing itself to the world, but to the individual requirements of each painting. While she would be the first to admit to and in fact embrace her influences, it is also true that her recent paintings are like no others, not even those she herself has made in the past. As it is to painting's history, Seidl's relationship to her own painting is not settled, but dynamic and thriving; and she continually manages to re-engage and reinvigorate our appreciation of the unbounded and mysterious rectangle, the canvas.



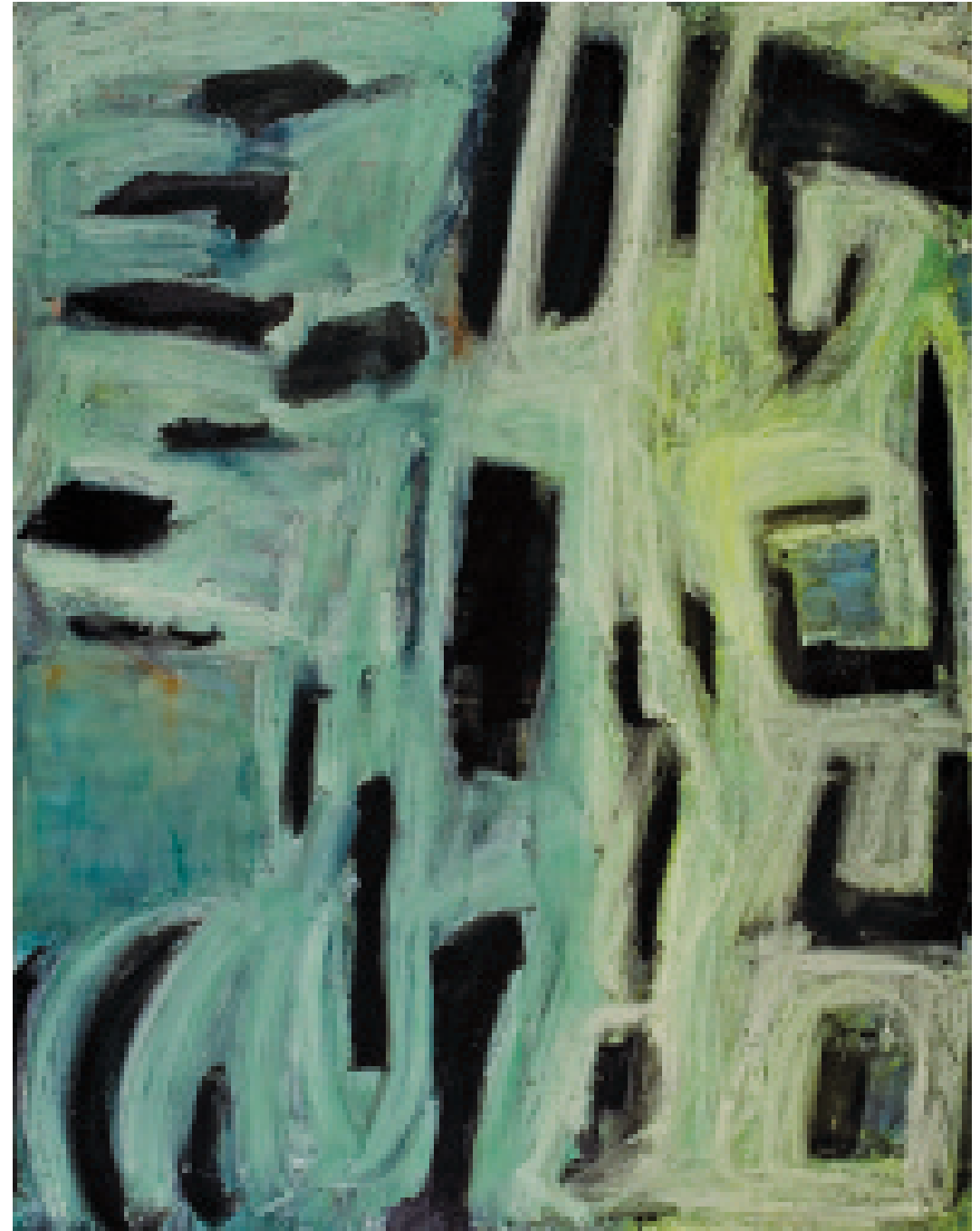
LANDSAKES OIL ON LINEN 25 x 29" 2009





PLATE 4

SMALL TALK OIL ON LINEN 24 x 22" 2009



FOR THE LIFE OF ME OIL ON CANVAS 54 x 42" 2006

PLATE 5



PLATE 6

TRUTH BE TOLD OIL ON LINEN 30 x 23" 2008



BYGONES WILL BE BYGONES OIL ON LINEN 42 x 36" 2009

PLATE 7

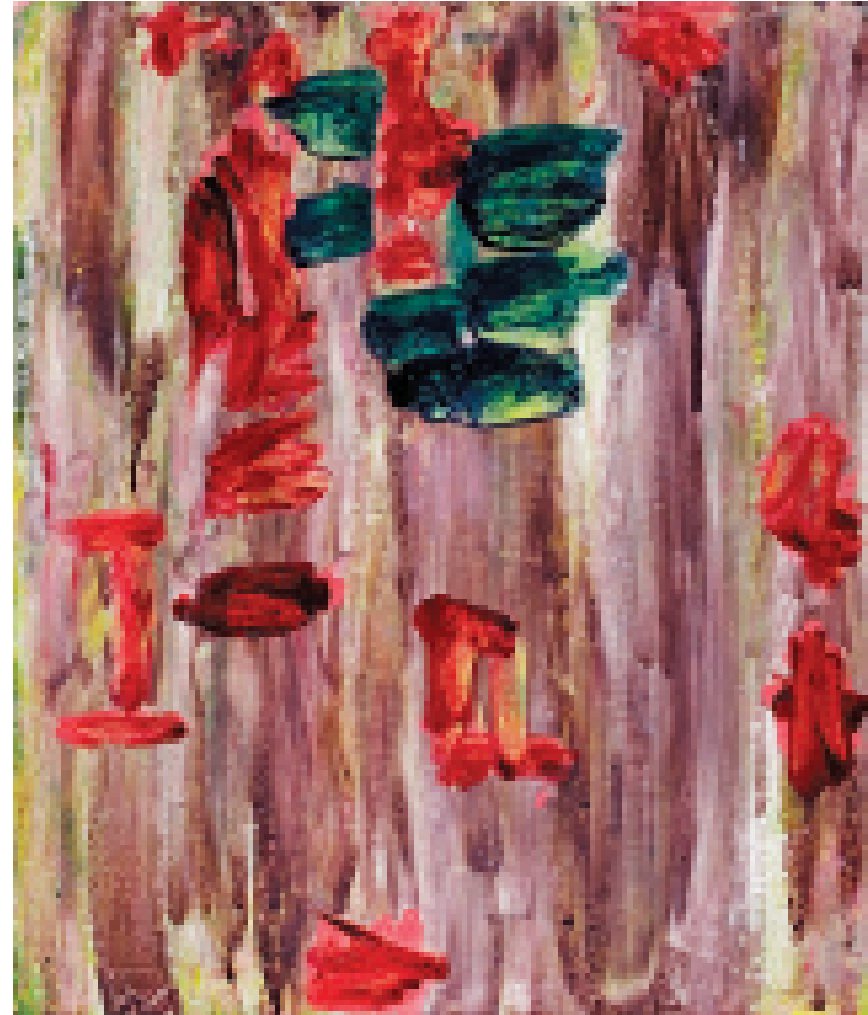


PLATE 8

ME TOO OIL ON LINEN 20 x 17" 2008



FOR KEEPS OIL ON LINEN 38 x 34" 2007

PLATE 9

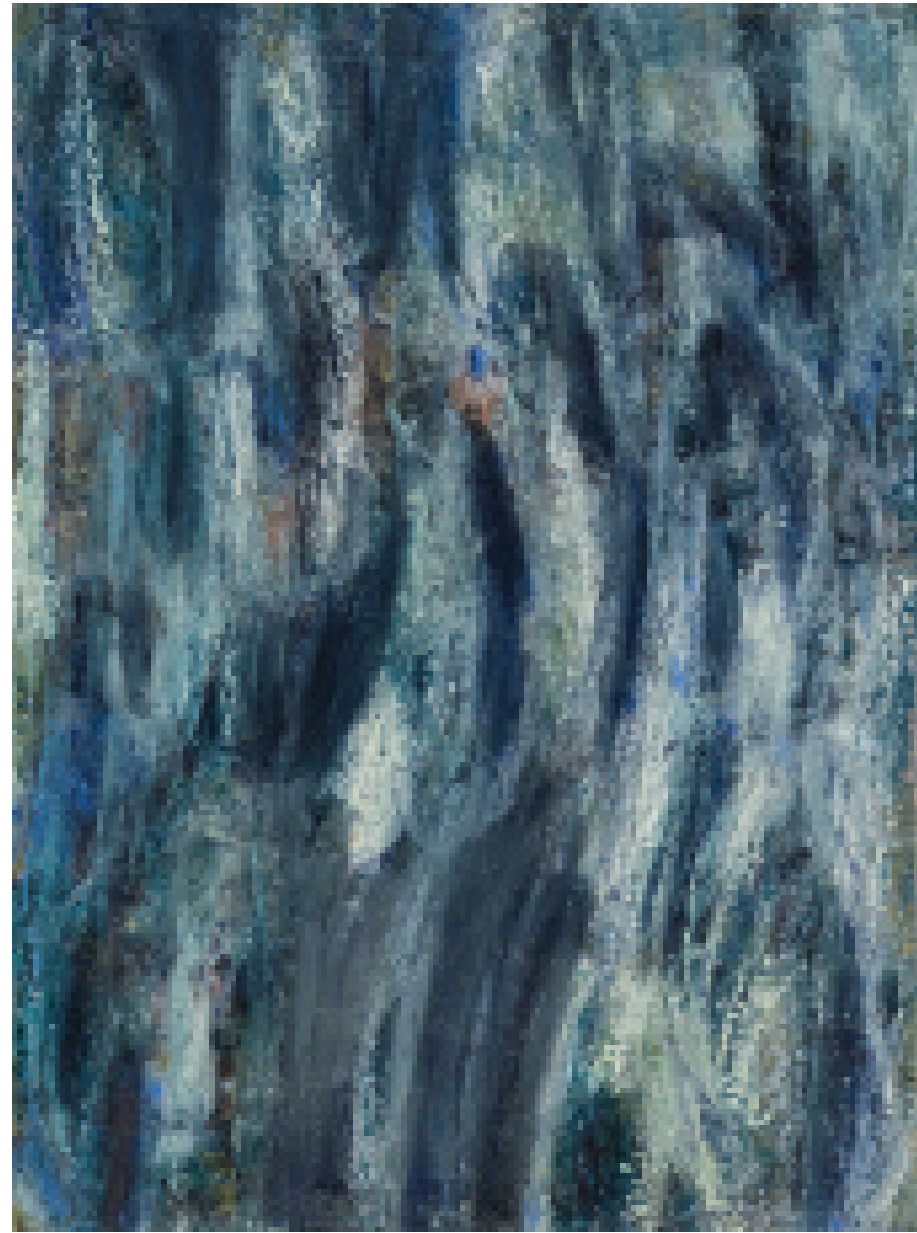


PLATE 10

DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH OIL ON CANVAS 38 x 28" 2010



FAR BE IT FROM ME OIL ON CANVAS 66 x 58" 2009

PLATE 11



PLATE 12

ALL EARS OIL ON LINEN 21 x 17" 2008



ONE MISSISSIPPI OIL ON LINEN 66 x 42" 2008

PLATE 13

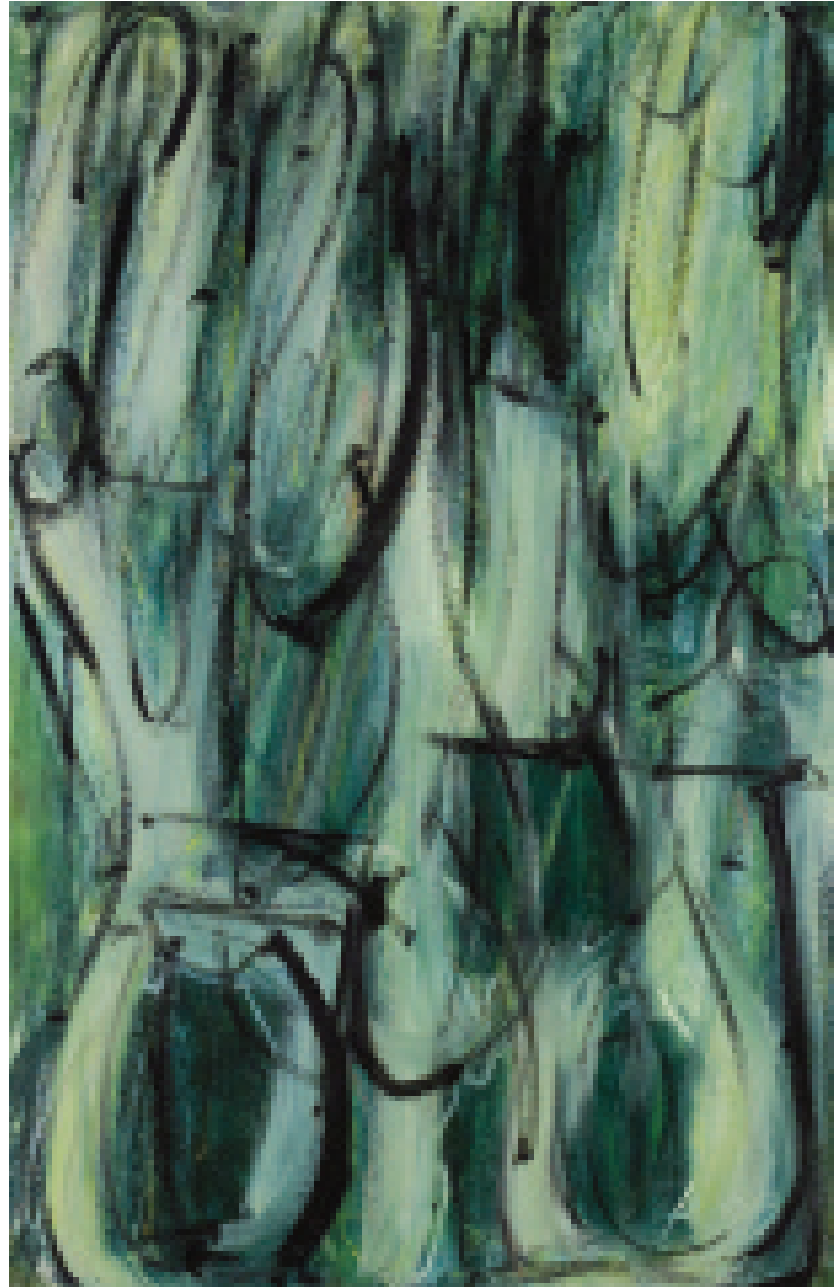


PLATE 14

HIGH HOPES OIL ON CANVAS 42 x 27" 2009



PERFECT STRANGER OIL ON LINEN 42 x 30" 2009

PLATE 15

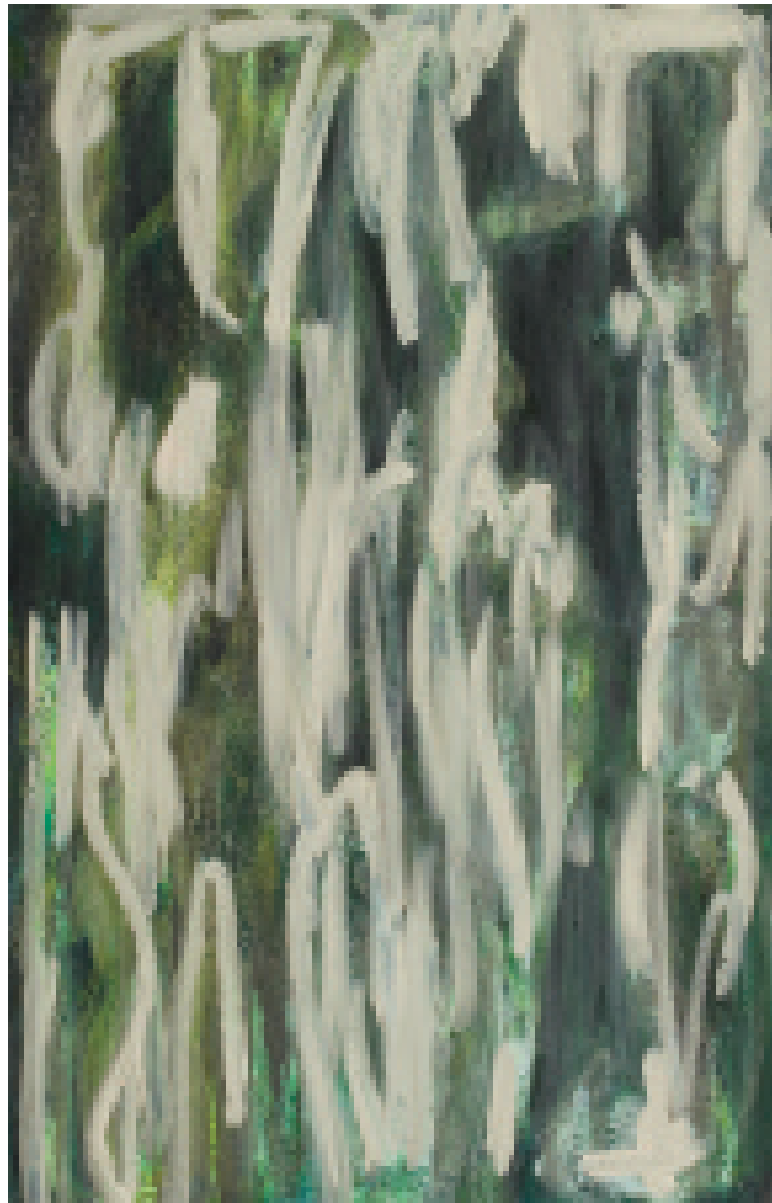
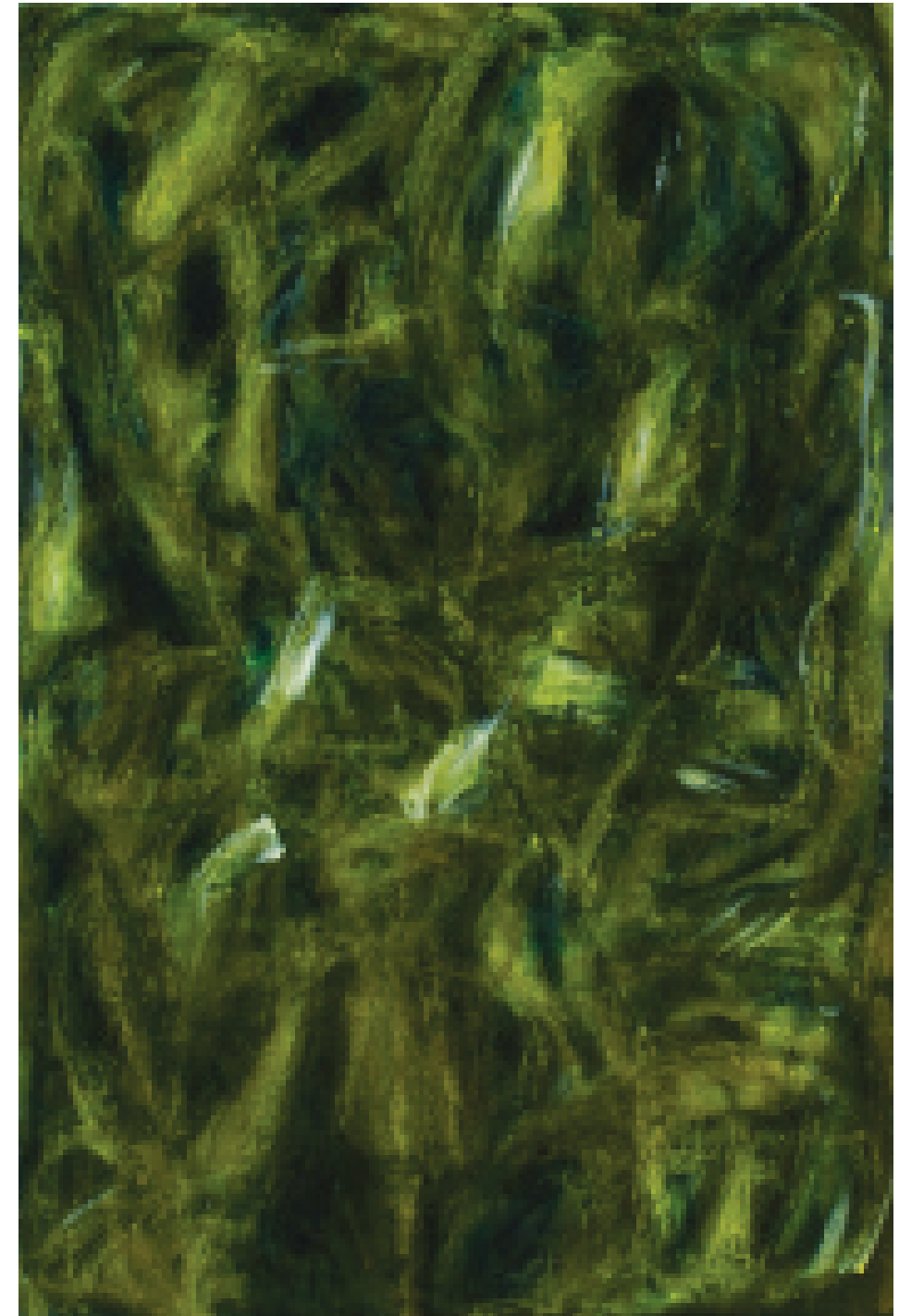


PLATE 16

UNSUNG OIL ON CANVAS 42 x 27" 2008



TAKE MY WORD FOR IT ON LINEN 54 x 36" 2010

PLATE 17



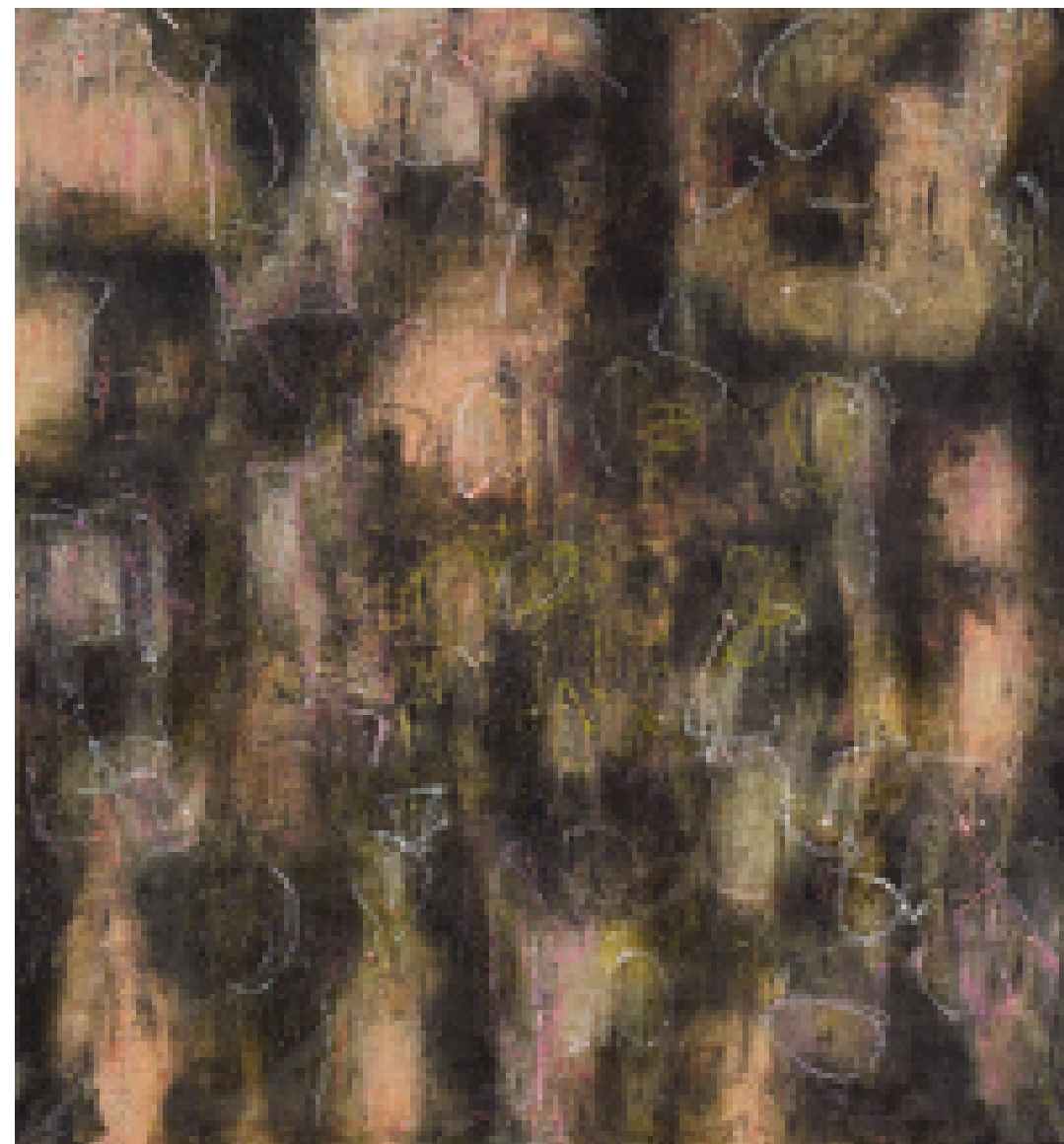
PLATE 18

BE ON MY SIDE - I'LL BE ON YOUR SIDE OIL ON WOOD 14 x 11" 2009



SECOND NATURE OIL ON LINEN 44 x 40" 2005

PLATE 19



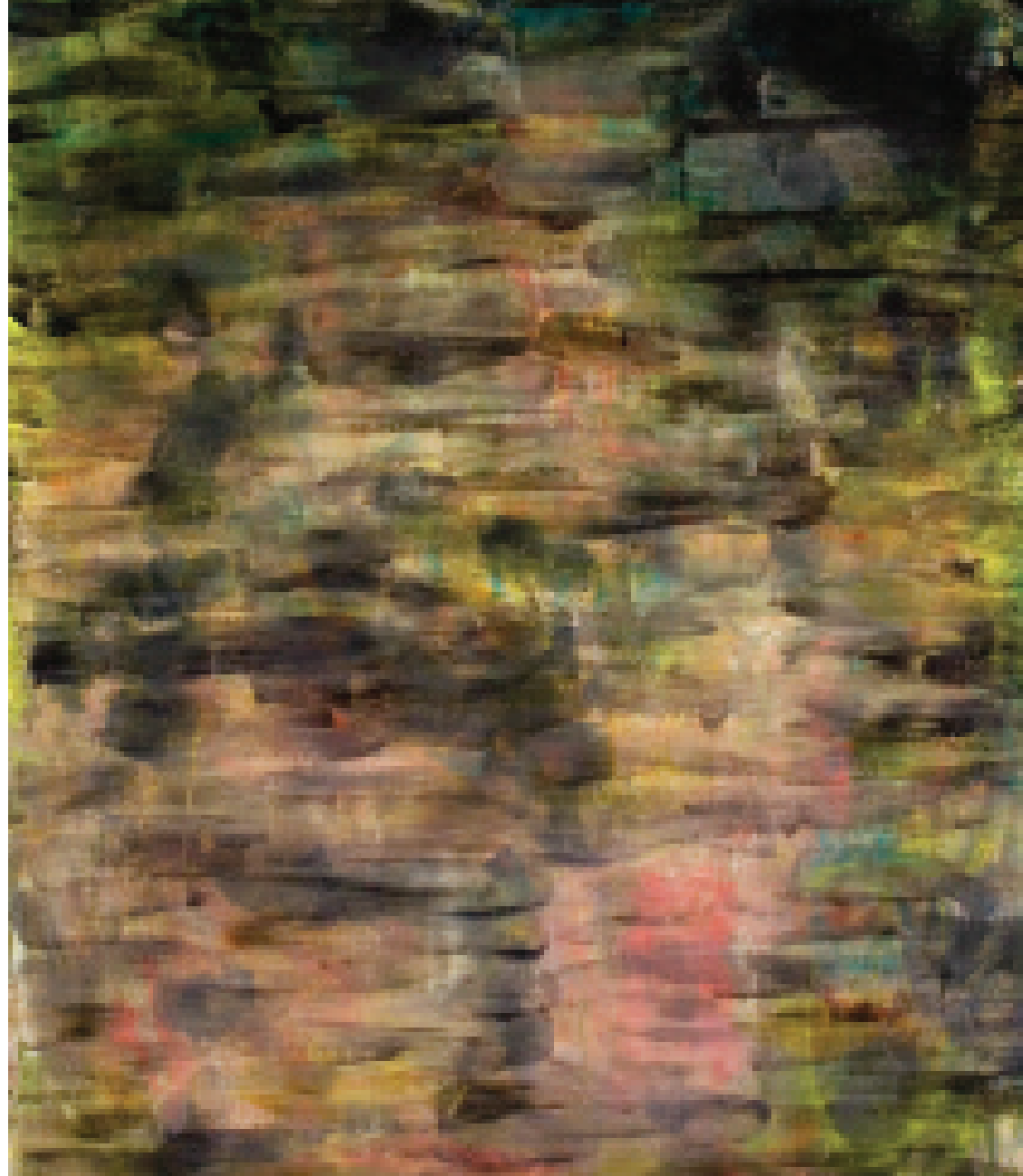


PLATE 22

SLIPSTREAM OIL ON LINEN 42 x 36" 2005



KINGDOM COME OIL ON LINEN 42 x 32" 2010

PLATE 23

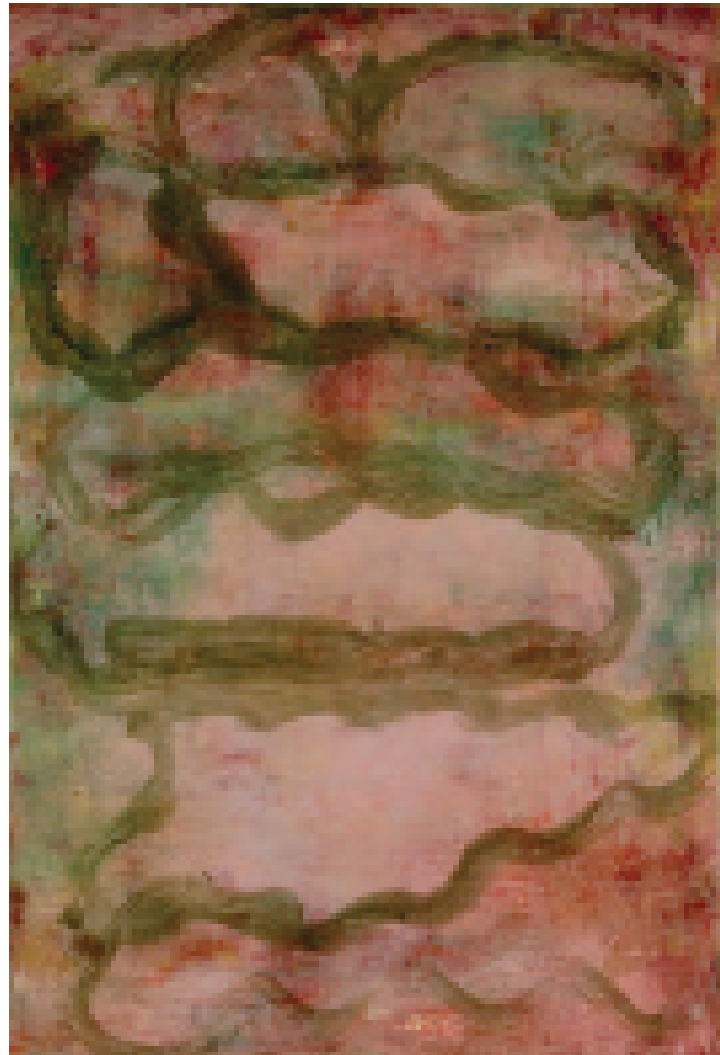


PLATE 24

ROSE COLORED OIL ON LINEN 29 x 20" 2005



FAIR IS FAIR OIL ON CANVAS 54 x 42" 2010

PLATE 25

SEIDL TITLES

*"Works of art are of an infinite loneliness....
only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them." Rilke*

Claire Seidl's painting **Heart Crossed** is a promise, an assurance that some truth is being told. It says *listen to this*. All Seidl titles are personal because the paintings are personal. This is simple but the work is not. The work is personal, not because the paintings describe private aspects of the artist's life – her relationships, family, view of the world and place in it. The work is personal because it intimates, because it is intimate. That is to say the work gives notice, it announces and makes itself known; and boldly but without bluntness it shows itself. It relates directly its essential nature, like an eyewitness account of its making. Paint is put on canvas these ways and made to become something else. This.

Each painting is a commitment, but not to a particular look, and not to anything outside of the painting. No agendas are meant to be satisfied. No program is met. Each of the paintings has its own exigencies; and a late night walk through the darkened studio where they are made is like a walk through new territory, where strange presences live, not lurking like animal presences, but existing calmly as evidence of something uniquely human, a commitment to putting paint on canvas in ways governed by the paint, and the canvas, certain tools, and the artist's hands, their muscle memory, a willingness to newly gesture, and her original mind. These paintings are personal, and they are also generous. They are not doing us any favors, but they seem always to be offering something of themselves. For instance there is one with the title **Moose Calls**. Never mind that only a few of us have ever heard a moose call; and even though the moose itself is not discernible, its whereabouts are, and it calls for us, again and again.

Jon Chodosh
New York City – 1984

Claire Seidl is best known as an abstract painter, and for the last fifteen years she has also been a serious photographer. Born in Connecticut in 1951, she was educated at Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts (BFA 1973) and Hunter College (MFA 1982). She has had twenty-five one-person shows and been included in more than a hundred group shows throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. Her paintings and photographs have been exhibited at the Aldrich Museum in Connecticut, the Portland Museum of Art and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Maine, the Noyes Museum in New Jersey, the McNay Art Museum in Texas, the Krasnoyarsk Museum Center and the Novosibirsk State Art Museum in Russia; and are included in numerous public, corporate and private collections. Her work has been reviewed in the New York Times, the New York Observer, the Brooklyn Rail, and the Portland Press Herald; and in Art in America, Art News, Arts, Partisan Review, and the New Art Examiner.

She lives and works in New York City and in Rangeley, Maine.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

CLAIRE SEIDL - New Paintings

November 3 – December 19, 2010

Lesley Heller Workspace
54 Orchard Street, New York, New York 10002
Tel. 212 410 6120
www.lesleyheller.com

Book design: Peter Blandori – designBLANDORI (www.blandori.com)

Photography: Thom O'Connor – The Tabletop Studio (www.thomoconnor.com)

Printed by: Velocity Print Solutions, Scotia, New York

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